

4-1990

Chaucer and Medieval Religious Figures

Kerre Conerly

Follow this and additional works at: https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/senior_research



Part of the [Classics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Conerly, Kerre, "Chaucer and Medieval Religious Figures" (1990). *Senior Research Projects*. 134.
https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/senior_research/134

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Southern Scholars at KnowledgeExchange@Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Research Projects by an authorized administrator of KnowledgeExchange@Southern. For more information, please contact jspears@southern.edu.

1989

Chaucer and Medieval Religious Figures

by

Kerre Conerly

History 495

Dr. David Smith/ Dr. Benjamin McArthur

April 18, 1990

"The Friar's concubine is expecting their fourth child," announced the town crier. He continued, "the Monk is wearing his gold pin today, and the Pardoner is making 100 marks a year." Now, it is highly unlikely that reports like these surfaced in the fourteenth century, but people knew corruption existed within the Church without being told. They lived in villages, and most everyone knew everybody else's business. This was unlike recent scandals caused by Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart since few found fault until the press discovered their corruption and gleefully told the world. But during Chaucer's life religion was closely controlled by the Roman Catholic Church. Clergy were above the law, and laymen were at the mercy of both the law and the Church. Chaucer observed this situation and proceeded to inspect clergy in greater detail. Then he wrote about them and their various vices. The Canterbury Tales is the result of years of Chaucer's observation of clergy and laity alike.

During Geoffrey Chaucer's lifetime, a great deal of religious rumbling shook England. The clergy were criticized by members of every social status. The Church's authority weakened as its moral teachings were ridiculed, and the education system fell from its grasp.¹ Many of the churchmen realized that the sinful ways of some clergy were destroying the Church, but these few could do little to stem the ever pressing tide of

¹ C. Warren Hollister, The Making of England: 55 B.C. to 1399, 4th ed., (Lexington: D. C. Heath and Co., 1983), pp. 274-275.

corruption.²

The popes often led down the path of depravity. "As one contemporary complained, the supreme pastor was supposed to lead Christ's flock, not to fleece it."³ During their stay in Avignon, popes became even more concerned with money. Pope John XXII completely reorganized the Church's fiscal system. The Church then grew wealthier, but spiritually it became bankrupt.⁴

It was generally accepted that hostility existed between priests and parishioners since priests were money collectors as well as pastors. Not only was the amount of money collected in question, but also the various means of acquiring it. The probate of wills became a very lucrative endeavor of the Church. It received donations from those on their deathbeds and then charged vast sums to probate the will after their demise as well. Indulgences, donations for penance, also caused a great deal of controversy in the Church. Popes and priests alike often sold them cheaply in order to make money quickly. The laity was scandalized by both of these schemes which laid the foundation for the Reformation.⁵

Perhaps the most flamboyant sin of many clergy was their

²G. G. Coulton, Ten Medieval Studies, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), p. 138.

³C. Warren Hollister, Medieval Europe: A Short History, 5th ed., (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), p. 237.

⁴Ibid., p. 325.

⁵Coulton, Ten Medieval Studies, pp. 132, 135-136.

practice of living with concubines. During the years 1314-1346, four parishes were visited by Odo Rigaldi, a church official. Within these thirty years, eighteen scandals were recorded involving eight priests. A certain priest of Littry was reported five times over a fourteen year period for living with his concubine and their children. A priest of Norwich City around 1333 was charged with having relations with three different women.⁶ In 1371 the Commons proposed that clergy living in open sin with their concubines should be deprived of their earnings and that ordinary courts should have jurisdiction over priests.⁷ However, these legal actions did not solve the problem.

So, where did Chaucer fit into all this religious ferment? First, he was not a conscious reformer of religion, but an observer of character. He "was able to illuminate vividly the vices and virtues of contemporary clerics."⁸ Second, Chaucer surely wished to please his patron, John of Gaunt. Gaunt practiced orthodox religion and supported both abbeys and friars. However, Gaunt deliberately irritated clergy by aiding Wycliffe at times.⁹ In this regard, Chaucer was subjected to the brunt of religious political games. This exposure probably lent some

⁶ Ibid., pp. 146-147.

⁷ G. G. Coulton, Chaucer and His England. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1957), p. 298.

⁸ Hollister, Making of England, p. 273.

⁹ Emile Legouis, Geoffrey Chaucer, tr. L. Lailavoix, 1928. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961), pp. 33, 36-37.

ideas to his Canterbury characters since he listed them in the General Prologue by social status as well as sinfulness. For example, the Prioress was near the top of the social level, and her sins were presented as only slight infringements of the rules. However, the Summoner and Pardoner were listed at the end due to their social stations and their rather offensive sins.¹⁰ Some of the most prominent sins of the Church included greed, lack of humility, and loose morals. Chaucer illustrated these problems in several of his characters. By reviewing both the vices and the characters, a clear picture emerges of the extent of Church corruption in the fourteenth century.

Greediness was a central vice to several Canterbury characters. Money became most desirable to the very clergy who were to denounce the need for it. For instance, Chaucer's Pardoner was quite a greedy person. In the Prologue to his Tale he boldly announced:

But shortly myn entente I wol devyse:
 I preche of no thyng but for coveityse

 Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice
 Which that I use, and that is avarice.
 But though myself be gilty in that synne,
 Yet kan I maken oother folk to twynne
 From avarice, and soore to repente.

¹⁰Donald R. Howard, Chaucer: His Life, His Works, His World, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1987), pp. 410-411.

But that is nat my principal entente;

I preche nothyng but for coveitise.¹¹

Indeed, the Pardoner may well be Chaucer's most greedy character, but more were yet to come from Chaucer's brilliant observations.

Friars certainly were not left out when it came to greed. In the General Prologue, Friar Huberd was described as "an esy man to yeve penaunce,/ Ther as he wiste to have a good pitaunce . . . Therefore in stede of wepyng and preyeres/ Men moote yeve silver to the pouvre freres."¹² Chaucer pointed out that Friar Huberd only liked to associate with the rich since "ther as a profit sholde arise. . . ."¹³ Of course, these two characters were not the only greedy ones in the Tales, but their remarks were perhaps the most direct on the subject.

Chaucer obviously was aware of the greed of many clergymen, and history supports his characterizations. Pardoners apparently possessed the talent for making money. They were originally granted powers of absolution because so few could travel to shrines. However, pardoners turned indulgences into a lucrative business for themselves.¹⁴ By 1390 the situation had declined to the point that even Pope Boniface IX took notice and complained

¹¹Geoffrey Chaucer, The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, F. N. Robinson, ed., 2nd ed., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), p. 429, ll. 423-424, 427-433.

¹²Ibid., p.19, ll. 223-224, 231-232.

¹³Ibid., p. 19, l. 249.

¹⁴Derek Pearsall, "Chaucer's Pardoner: The Death of a Salesman," Chaucer Review, 17 (Spring 1983), p. 362.

that pardoners were absolving even the most impenitent simply for the cash.¹⁵

Friars, on the other hand, were to be beggars for all worldly comforts. By the second generation of friars, travellers feared them as much as any robbers.¹⁶ Friars had honed their skills of begging to a perfect point, and Chaucer was well aware of it due to his association with friars in John of Gaunt's household. In fact, every time Chaucer mentioned friars in the Canterbury Tales it was of their "unextenuated hypocritical villainy."¹⁷

Another rampant problem of the Church during the Late Middle Ages was the lack of humility. This was a logical step for clergymen who were usually acquiring more money than common laymen. Even a slight sense of affluence can often alter one's ideas of social status, and clergymen were not immune to this change. In fact, as Chaucer illustrated, most changed their minds quite readily.

For example, the good Friar Huberd lacked humility. His semi-cope was unlike a poor man's, but more "lyk a maister or a pope./ Of double worstede was his semycope,/ That rounded as a

¹⁵Coulton, Ten Medieval Studies, pp. 133-134.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 168.

¹⁷Arnold Williams, "Chaucer and the Friars," Chaucer Criticism: The Canterbury Tales, eds. Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor, (Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame Press, 1960), p. 63.

belle out of the presse."¹⁸ To fit in with noblemen he also "lipsed, for his wantownesse,/ To make his Englissh sweete upon his tonge. . . ."¹⁹ In both instances he was only trying to be acceptable to the rich because they were his most profitable parishioners.²⁰

Friar John of the Summoner's Tale displayed his lack of humility in a different manner. Outraged at being insulted in the process of searching for promised money, Friar John cried to the manorial lord, "'Sire,' quod this frere, 'an odious meschief/ This day bityd is to myn ordre and me. . . .'"²¹ Friar John felt insulted and wished an apology. He was greatly concerned with his dignity and, of course, the money.

Yet another character lacking humility was the Pardoner. The man actually bragged about most of his vices. For example, he readily told the group about his preaching skills and tricks. Of a certain trick he crowed "I wonne, yeer by yeer,/ An hundred mark sith I was pardoner."²² Of another he commented, "I preche so as ye han herd bifoore,/ And telle an hundred false japes moore."²³ He appeared quite pleased with himself.

¹⁸Chaucer, p. 19, ll. 261-263.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 19, ll. 264-265.

²⁰Williams, p. 75.

²¹Chaucer, p. 99, ll. 2190-2191.

²²Ibid., p. 149, ll. 389-390.

²³Ibid., p. 149, ll. 393-394.

The Prioress, Madame Eglentyne, also had problems adapting to the proper servile attitude of her work. She came from a lower upper class family which entitled her to be on the fringes of high society. Because of this background she was always overly conscious of her appearance and manners. She took great pains to speak French "ful faire and fetisly. . . ." ²⁴ Chaucer continued the description:

And sikerly she was of greet desport,
 And ful plesaunt, and amyalbe of port,
 And peyned hire to countrefete cheere
 Of court, and to been estatlich of manere,
 And to ben holden digne of reverence.²⁵

According to etiquette books of the time, Madame Eglentyne followed the rules to the letter, but this was due to her insecurity in her gentillesse.²⁶ Her actions suited laity, not clergy, and exposed her for the misplaced courtier that she was.

Not only was she concerned with her manners, but also with her dreams of love. On her bracelet were the words Amor vincit omnia. But this maxim leads to the next discussion.

Loose moral codes of clergymen were a constant problem of the Church. Chaucer suggested in the General Prologue that the Prioress had hopes for love and that monks were partial to

²⁴Ibid., p. 18, l. 132.

²⁵Ibid., p. 18, ll. 137-141.

²⁶Howard, p. 55.

immorality. The Monk's gold pin was shaped in "A love-knotte in the gretter ende. . . ." ²⁷ In the Shipman's Tale, Chaucer did more than suggest; he spelled it out. Sir John, the monk, creates some mild marital problems. He passionately confessed to another's wife that he had "loved [her] specially/ Aboven alle wommen, sikerly." ²⁸ He promises "I wol brynge yow an hundred frankes./ And with that word he caughte hire by the flankes./ And hire embraceth harde, and kiste hire ofte." ²⁹ Sir John gave the money he had borrowed from her husband to the wife knowing she would soon spend it. Then she cleverly convinced her husband that Sir John meant no harm. However, the Shipman's purse remained lighter just the same.

Friars were also found guilty of immorality. Friar John pushed his luck with Thomas' wife by embracing her "in his armes narwe,/ And kiste hire sweete, and chirketh as a sparwe. . . ." ³⁰ Friar Huberd also loved the pretty girls according to the General Prologue. Chaucer described him as "wantowne and a merye. . . Ful wel biloved and famulier was he/ With frankeleyns over al in his contree. . . ." ³¹ Chaucer was not the only writer aware of friars' indiscretions. Gower and the author of Piers Plowman

²⁷Chaucer, p. 19, l. 197.

²⁸Ibid., p. 157, ll. 153-154.

²⁹Ibid., p. 158, ll. 201-203.

³⁰Ibid., p. 95, ll. 1803-1804.

³¹Ibid., p. 19, ll. 208, 215-216.

concurred with Chaucer that friars were a danger to family life.³²

Chaucer offered a very satirical view of religious figures. In just the few characters included in this study, Chaucer exemplified three prevalent vices of the Roman Catholic clergy of the fourteenth century. This is yet another reason among many why Chaucer's Canterbury Tales has endured through the ages. Even today, clergy are often found guilty of the same vices Chaucer pointed out 600 years ago. While newspapers announce religious corruption on a regular basis, Chaucer related it all centuries before them.

³²Coulton, Ten Medieval Studies, p. 168.

Bibliography

- Chaucer, Geoffrey, The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, F. N. Robinson, ed., 2nd ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957.
- Coulton, G. G., Chaucer and His England, New York: Russell & Russell, 1957.
- Coulton, G. G., Ten Medieval Studies, Boston: Beacon Press, 1959.
- Hollister, C. Warren, Medieval Europe: A Short History, 5th ed., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982.
- Hollister, C. Warren, The Making of England: 55 B.C. to 1399, 4th ed., Lexington: D. C. Heath and Co., 1983.
- Howard, Donald R., Chaucer: His Life, His Works, His World, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1987.
- Legouis, Emile, Geoffrey Chaucer, tr. L. Lailavoix, 1928, New York: Russell & Russell, 1961.
- Pearsall, Derek, "Chaucer's Pardoner: The Death of a Salesman," Chaucer Review, 17 (Spring 1983), pp. 358-365.
- Williams, Arnold, "Chaucer and the Friars," Chaucer Criticism: The Canterbury Tales, eds., Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor, Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame Press, 1960.